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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SITUATION REPORT 28: HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN
MALAWI STABLE, BUT COULD DETERIORATE POST-HARVEST

1. SUMMARY. THIS IS A JOINT USAID/DCHA-USAID/MALAWI
REPORTING CABLE. FROM MARCH 26-31, TWO FFP OFFICERS, OFDA
REGIONAL ADVISOR, AND USAID/MALAWI AGRICULTURAL ADVISOR
PARTICIPATED IN THE ONGOING VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT (VAC)
IN MALAWI. DESPITE THIS TIME PERIOD BEING THE HEIGHT OF
THE HUNGER SEASON, THE CURRENT HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN
MALAWI SEEMS TO BE STABLE. HOWEVER, SUMMER CROP PROSPECTS
IN MANY AREAS OF SOUTHERN MALAWI ARE POOR, POTENTIALLY
LEADING TO RENEWED HUMANITARIAN NEEDS DURING THE 2004-2005
HUNGER SEASON. PRODUCTION IN NORTHERN/CENTRAL MOZAMBIQUE,
WHERE MANY MALAWIANS ARE CURRENTLY PERFORMING CASUAL LABOR
AND BUYING MAIZE, WILL ALSO IMPACT BORDER AREAS IN
CHIKWAWA AND NSANJE DISTRICTS. AS THE ISSUE OF FOOD
SECURITY BECOMES INCREASINGLY POLITICAL WITH THE APPROACH
OF ELECTIONS, DONOR FRUSTRATION IS MOUNTING FOLLOWING THE
IMPROPER RELEASE OF 30,000 MT OF MAIZE FROM THE GOM'S
STRATEGIC RESERVES TO THE PARASTATAL, ADMARC. END
SUMMARY.

VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT

2. From March 26-31, USAID staff traveled with two of the
four VAC teams to assess food security prospects for the
coming year in Malawi. The teams are conducting
interviews with staff from the Ministry of Agriculture,
Irrigation, and Food Security (MOAIFS) and communities in
vulnerable districts throughout the country. Their
primary data will be combined with secondary data from a
variety of sources to provide the likely scenario for the
coming months. Members of the VAC come from various
organizations, including three GOM ministries or offices,
FAO, WFP, FEWS, and several NGOs. The VAC uses the
household food economy approach and is led by Save the
Children/UK, a recognized expert in this methodology.

3. USAID staff traveled to the most vulnerable districts
of southern Malawi: Chikwawa and Nsanje (Lower Shire); and
Zomba, Chiradzulu, Mangochi, and Machinga (Shire
Highlands). In general, the team concluded that the
current situation is stable, particularly as last year's
harvest was improved over previous years. However, the
upcoming summer harvest in these areas is extremely
concerning. Selected communities across all wealth groups
consistently anticipated much reduced yields due to the
late onset of the rains and prolonged drought conditions.
As previously reported, the main rains were delayed in
southern Malawi by more than two months this year,
resulting in late or multiple plantings. However, the
rains ended in early March in most areas, thus leaving
crops to wilt during a critical stage of growth. Should
the rains recommence now, most farmers still anticipate
only a minor possibility of harvesting some sorghum and
millet.

4. As a result, the team anticipates that the 2004-2005
hunger season will begin earlier than usual (as early as
July) and could substantially impact the poorest
households with little ability to cope. However, the
severity of impact will depend upon numerous factors, such
as winter production prospects and the situation in
surrounding parts of Mozambique. Many farmers in these
areas plant winter crops in wetlands along the Shire
River. Others without access to wetlands depend upon
"ganyu" opportunities in Malawi and Mozambique to
supplement their food production. Communities already
anticipate that winter production will be reduced due to

low water levels in the wetlands. Some communities are already employing coping mechanisms such as selling off assets, gathering firewood, and consuming wild foods.

15. However, the conditions described above are not representative of the country-wide situation. The VAC report will consolidate the findings of all teams and should be better able to highlight food security status for the coming year. The report will be released by the end of April. In addition, the Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission (CFSAM) is scheduled for the end of April and will be able to determine crop production at the time of harvest.

----- REPEATED MISTAKES -----

16. As previously reported, ADMARC continues to sell maize at subsidized prices (10 MK/kg) well below those of the world market. Such sales are not targeted to those who need it most. Anecdotal evidence suggests that private traders are purchasing the subsidized maize (when it is available) and reselling it to communities for a profit. In most southern areas, current prices are 20 MK/kg and higher.

17. Once ADMARC depots ran out of commercial stocks in February, the GOM issued a directive on March 6 that ADMARC depots must have a supply within five days. Thus, the GOM ordered the National Food Reserve Agency (NFRA) to release 30,000 MT from the strategic reserves for ADMARC depots. Such a release violated the rules established by the NFRA Technical Committee, including the regulation that bidders must provide a bank guarantee for purchases. Donors were furious with these actions, prompting an apology from the GOM published in The Nation on March 27. However, the damage is done and such actions eerily mirror those of three years ago when the GOM sold off its reserves prior to the last crisis.

----- NUTRITION -----

18. Overall, the nutrition situation in Malawi is relatively stable. Nutritional surveys conducted in five districts of Malawi between December and February found global acute malnutrition (GAM) rates of less than 3 percent. However, a concerning amount of oedema was observed in the surveys, potentially in part due to lack of dietary diversity.

19. Various NGOs have also conducted rapid MUAC screening to identify areas of concern. The main areas of concern include parts of Nsanje, Chikwawa, Mwanza, and Lilongwe Districts. Several GOM Nutritional Rehabilitation Units (NRUs) have reported increased numbers of admissions. WFP, Concern Worldwide, and World Vision are conducting supplementary feeding in some of these areas, and the OFDA-funded CoGuard consortium is planning supplementary distributions as needed in April. Nutrition activities are being coordinated through the Targeted Nutrition Programs (TNP) working group chaired by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF.

----- STATUS OF DISASTER DECLARATION -----

10. According to USAID/Malawi, talk within the GOM of declaring a disaster seems to have died down in the last couple of weeks. However, incentive to declare a disaster remains high with upcoming elections slated for May 18. Food security continues to be an issue debated in the national press and discussed at political rallies. The US Mission has agreed to advise DCHA/OFDA of any change in the situation and to contact the Southern Africa Regional Office (SARO) prior to making any official declaration.

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